

Spirituality and Humour: Transcendence Through Laughter

Georgian Triangle Lifelong Learning Institute
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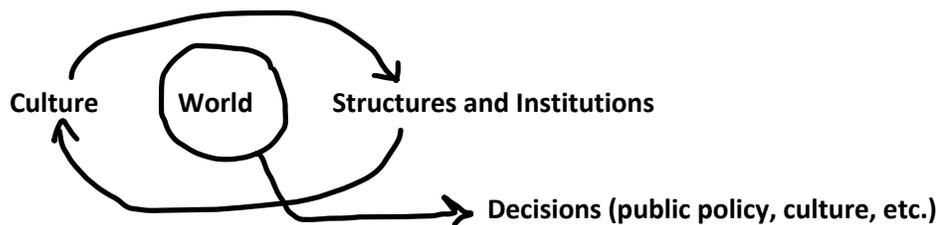
Section One: Peter Berger and the “World”

The Social Construction of Reality

1. The social construction of reality (see terrible graphic below)
2. Externalization → Objectification → Internalization
3. The social order: culture ↔ “plausibility structures = a “world”
4. Alienation and “bad faith”: loss of freedom, self-understanding, self-determination
5. Transcendence: breaking through this “world”

The Social Construction of the World (A comically bad drawing of a key concept)

The Thomas theorem: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”



Section Two: Berger on “The Comic”: The humorous dimension of life

1. The Comic and the mind/spirit-body dualism
 - a. Why comedy can heal
2. The Comic in everyday life: an intrusion
3. Presentation of a “counter-world” and a “counter-perspective”
4. The cognitive dimension
 - a. The moral dimension: reveals hypocrisies and absurdities
 - b. Reveals the world as absurd: the debunking function of comedy
 - c. Relativization of ordinary world and experience
 - d. The comic perspective on life gives us some distance on ourselves

Berger’s definition of “The Comic”

- The comic is a universal human phenomenon
- Highlights incongruities (i.e, social pretensions v. humiliating realities)
- Violates the implicit, shared order of things (that’s not supposed to happen!)
- The body and its urges and needs intrude on pretentious self perceptions or social norms
- Implies an intuitive grasp of normalcy (“what should be”)
- Comedy “transcends” the established order:
- Creates an alternate world with its alternate logic (defies the logic of our “world”)
- The Comic is potentially dangerous (therefore, it is controlled)
- The Comic is situated at the border of the mind/body: why comedy can heal

Section Three: The Comic, Spirituality, and Transcendence

Comedy, spirituality and religion (A sociological approach)

1. Social order and the world: constructed, contested, and fragile
2. "Naturalness" of the world is contested by magic, religion, and comedy
3. Comedy, like mysticism, must be contained or domesticated
4. A functionalist interpretation of the comic (comedy as relief valve)
5. The Comic as "popular sociology" provides insight into society
6. Jokes and the economy: a lot of insight in a brief joke
7. Jokes as "an attack on control" (e.g., jokes in former Soviet Union)
8. Why all the good jokes are Jewish jokes (marginality and comedy)

Comedy, spirituality and religion (A theological approach)

1. Comedy and faith show us another world is possible
2. God as totaliter aliter (Totally Other)
3. St. Paul: "fools for Christ"
4. Are there universal incongruities?
 - a. Secular incongruity #1: Having a body v. being a body
 - b. Secular incongruity #2: Human greatness v. human insignificance
5. Faith and universal incongruities
 - a. The clown and pratfalls: The hurts of this world are not real
 - b. The jack-in-the-box: When we are hurt, we get up again
 - c. Peek-a-boo: The presence and absence of God
6. The Comic and Berger's "signals of transcendence"

Some Criticisms of Berger

1. Incongruity and ambivalence
2. Community: Comedy creates community: "I see you." "I get you." "We find this funny."
3. The dark side of comedy (mentioned in passing): Comedy as a barrier to transcendence
 - a. Ethno-racist, sexist, homophobic jokes
 - b. Laughing at the suffering of others

Section Four: Some Concluding Thoughts on Spirituality, Light, Dark, and Funny

1. Relativizing the relativizers
2. Spirituality and human existence
3. Viktor Frankl on the fullness of human life
4. Spirituality, peace, and justice
5. Spirituality and transcendence

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